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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Creation Spirituality

a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene

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November 1, 1998

Readings

God called the dry land Earth, and the waters... he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

The earth brought forth vegetation...And God saw that it was good.

God made the two great lights -- the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night -- and the stars... God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

God made the wild animals of the earth...and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over [everything on earth]. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Adapted from Genesis 1, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.)

Rejoicing
because we had met again
we rolled laughing
over and over upon the big bed.

The joy was not in a narrow sense
erotic -- not
narrow in any sense.
It was

that all impediments,
every barrier, of history,
of learn'd anxiety,
wrong place and wrong time,

had gone down,
vanished.
It was the joy

of two rivers
meeting in depths of the sea. (Denise Levertov, "*The Good Dream*")

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church --
I keep it, staying at Home --
With a Bobolink for a Chorister --
And an Orchard, for a Dome --

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice --
I just wear my Wings --
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton -- sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman --
And the sermon is never long,

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last --
I'm going, all along. (Emily Dickinson)

Sermon

Once upon a time, a little girl was born. Her happy parents named her Charity, because St. Paul had written to the Corinthians, "And now abideth faith, hope and charity, but the greatest of these is charity."

Since hers was a devout Christian family, Charity attended Sunday School regularly during her childhood, and she learned a lot of things, things that her parents and teachers knew she would need to live a good life.

She enjoyed Bible stories, but did not always understand them, so the adults who cared about her told her what they mean. She learned that God created humans in his image, so he must look like us, and that God is unquestionably a man, just as clearly as her own earthly father. She learned that he lived way, way, up in the sky, in some kind of a home that was totally separate from our world, and that everything depended on him.

There was an interesting and puzzling tale about a garden and two people and an apple and a snake. She would never have figured out, if her teacher hadn't told her, what the story means: it tells us, she was taught, that ALL human beings are sinners, just like the two in the garden who did something God told them not to. Having found out that fact -- that every single person in the world is born bad, because of those two people -- she was very relieved to find out that there was a way to be saved from her bad self. Jesus, God's son, came down to this earth and died, then arose and went to Heaven, in order to redeem us all from our original sinful nature. His death made it possible for those who were saved (those who believed on him) to go to Heaven -- a faithful person, she learned, looks always to that glorious future. It was good to know that her family and friends were saved, and she loved

Jesus with all her heart.

One of the other really important things she learned as she was growing up was that everything on earth was different from, and not as good as, the Heavenly Father's kingdom. She learned that, when she had really strong feelings -- like getting very mad, or loving something about to pieces -- she had to be really careful, because Satan was probably leading her into sin. She didn't exactly know where her soul was (science class in school didn't teach it), but she knew it was better and more important than her body. A lot better. A lot more important.

And so, Charity grew up relatively uneventfully, secure in the righteousness of what she had been taught. She went to college, worked, married, started a family.

But... Her experiences as she matured started raising questions about the religious values with which she was reared. Sometimes she would look at the startling golds and scarlets and flaming yellows of autumn leaves, glowing in the sun, and she would feel the same dumbstruck awe that she had sometimes felt in her childhood church, when the preacher talked about God. She loved her husband passionately, and sometimes felt in their physical loving that she was, for a moment, as united with him -- and the whole universe -- as she had been with Jesus when she was a child.

It became harder and harder to conceive of God as human -- surely God was greater than this struggling species of ours. And how could a loving God, whose son preached such equality, think that one gender ought to be in charge of the other?

She met agnostics and Unitarians and Mormons and the occasional Buddhist or Hindu, and they seemed about as good and bad as her friends and family. How could it be that every single one of them was doomed to burn in eternal hellfire? And when she held her newborn child in her arms for the first time, she absolutely knew that this was not a depraved creature. She stopped looking forward to Heaven very

much, since there was so much of wonder in everyday life, so much to do here and now.

She drifted away from her childhood faith, troubled by unresolved contradictions.

A familiar story, some version of which many of us here have experienced, often in a harsher fashion than Charity. Even those of us with no particular religious upbringing have not been able to avoid the widespread notion that the Universal Mystery is a male person, far removed from natural life as we know it. Whatever our childhood teachings, we could not possibly have avoided the dualisms bequeathed to us by the Fall -- Redemption Christian model that much of Western humanity has embraced for a couple of millennia. We, too, have been taught in ways subtle and obvious, that the spirit is superior to the flesh; that intellect is superior to emotion; that we are all separate entities, moving through this world in detachment from the rest of creation.

Let us take up Charity's path again, this time to a way in which she may find some reconciliation with her own tradition. Let us introduce her to Creation Spirituality. If we go with her, we may learn of reconciliation, too. For even if we reject this path, we are well served to learn life-affirming, creative, responsible alternatives to some of the theological and philosophical attitudes we have picked up from our culture.

Let us guide Charity to take classes at the Institute In Culture and Creation Spirituality, the college headed by theologian Father Matthew Fox, who is perhaps the most widely-known and articulate proponent of Creation Spirituality. Fox is a former Catholic priest, a Dominican, silenced by his church for his views -- he is now an Episcopal priest, and he began his own school when he longer fit into the traditional Catholic colleges.

Imagine Charity's surprise when she starts studying the Bible under the

tutelage of people like Fox, who have moved away from the old dogmas. There are two Creation myths in Genesis, with no clue given as to which is better (unless you consider order of presentation.) Why not pick the first one, the one in which God creates everything, chortling as he goes along, "This is good." The one in which he simply creates humans, male and female, with no indication of different status. And even looking at the second myth, the Garden of Eden story, with fresh eyes, Charity sees -- we see -- that the story does not start with sin. It starts with peace and harmony and God being right there in the midst of everything, very present, very palpable. All of creation is connected, and all live together tranquilly. This is a central, foundational position for all who follow Creation Spirituality: the Garden of Eden myth represents that humans are capable of disobedience and wrongdoing, yes, but the original condition is goodness. Original blessing, as Matthew Fox calls it.

Moving into the Christian scriptures, Fox and others return to the text, to rescue it from centuries of increasingly dogmatic interpretation. "In the beginning was the Word." But what scholars have called "Word" did not mean a circumscribed linguistic concept, it meant something more like "Universal Creative Energy." Charity might read, at her liberated college, wonderful early Christian writers like Hildegarde of Bingen, who wrote, "The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity. This Word manifests itself in every creature." (Fox, 35)

Creation Spirituality proponents point out that Jesus was here in the flesh. Whatever one may believe about Jesus' divinity, it seems laughably obvious, upon uncluttered reflection, that his message had something to do with flesh, with the earth, with where we are here and now. It is difficult to square the walking, talking, story-telling, eating, drinking, table-tossing Jesus with the message that spirit is of primary importance, that divinity exists in some supernatural realm.

Once she has understood these fresh interpretations, Charity is staggered by the implications. If people are not lost, depraved souls at

birth, but rather a complex mixture of virtue and sin, then it follows that they-we-have choices, and may choose paths of life or of death. If God is present everywhere, including within and among everything on earth, then God is accessible to all people -- the path to the holy may take many forms, and all faiths are "acceptable in God's sight." If the Holy is all around us all the time, we experience it, we don't just think about it. As pagan writer Starhawk says, "...we do not believe in the Goddess; we connect with her." (Fox, 73)

The implications come thick and fast, as we (or Charity) accustom ourselves to the liberating assumptions of Creation Spirituality, so different from those learned at our parents' and teachers' knees.

If the Great Mystery is manifest in all creation, then "all things are connected like the blood that unites us," in the words attributed to Chief Seattle. This, of course, means that each of us has responsibility for the rest of us, "us" meaning trees, people, bugs, bison, shrubs, lizards and all the myriad rest. Neglecting or abusing anything on earth is as destructive as neglecting or abusing parts of our own bodies -- our good, trusty, pleasure-loving bodies.

If the Divine is everywhere, including in our flawed selves, we have an obligation to embody it as best we can, in works of love and justice. This responsibility also means that we longer get to (or have to) look to our souls' heavenly future as the most important time dimension of our lives. We may well pray, meditate and strive for mystical union with the Universal Creative Energy, but we need to focus the work of our lives on the here and now. As Emily Dickinson says,

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last --
I'm going, all along.

Perhaps the single most cheering revelation offered by Creation Spirituality is the celebration of passion. Matthew Fox states, "What has been most lacking in society and religion in the West for the past six centuries has been a...way or path of affirmation, thanksgiving,

ecstasy." (33) If the universe came forth in a profusion of chaotic, tumbling, staggering energy, who are we to try to hedge in, squash, repress, and frown upon our own such energies? When we look about us at the abundance, the variety, the beauty, the strangeness of nature, how we contain ourselves? How can we keep from singing?

We sing the energy of Eros, of vast, expanding, blessing Love, taught by Jesus and other high prophets. We rejoice, and our joy is not "in a narrow sense erotic -- not narrow in any sense." We reclaim the beauty of the earth, and we joyously proclaim our part in the great, incomprehensible whole. We claim the entire untidy bundle of tears and laughter and sin and repentance and work and play and spirit and flesh.

"Thank God," says Charity, "for the love that from our birth, over and around us lies. Thank the Cosmic Mystery for a path which embraces all of heaven and earth, which respects all creation, which puts my responsibilities squarely upon my shoulders, and unites me with everything there is, known, imagined and unimaginable."

We have brought Charity to a place where she is born again, born anew into her old tradition, seeing God and Jesus with new eyes. We will leave her, for she is now ready to make other choices. Having seen that her tradition need not bind her in old, restrictive, elitist and dividing ways, she may choose to continue practicing her spiritual life within it -- she may take pride in calling herself a Christian, almost an evangelist for the new improved version of that concept. She may step out of her tradition, choosing Buddhist meditation, or Native American sweat lodges, or Wiccan circles, or "pagan" celebration of other sorts.

She certainly may become a Unitarian Universalist, for our way is in perfect harmony with the way of Creation Spirituality. The universe is mysterious, filled with beauty and love and abundant energy. All people have potential for both good and evil, and all people deserve basic respect. A faith is good only when it makes itself known in action, on this world, at this time.

The Holy manifests itself differently to different people, and all loving faith paths have merit. May the world become filled with those who follow these principles.

Sources Consulted:

Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1983.

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